

On Those Who Die Violently

St. Anastasios of Sinai



Answer about violently dying. Questions and answers about various chapters by various persons,
Question 18, PG 89, 500A-513B.

Question: "Do all those who fall from a height, or are covered by earth, or drown, suffer this from divine threat and concession or the action of the evil one?"

Answer: It is evident that God's mercies are unsearchable and his ways unsearchable, as the Scripture also says [Rom. 11:33]. However, it is not true that all who die violently do so because of their sins. Even Job's sons, though righteous, were buried under the ruins of their house [Job 1:19].

But Christ also teaches us this by saying that those eighteen men upon whom the tower of Siloam fell [Luke 13:4] were no more sinful than those who dwelt in Jerusalem; nor again those whose blood Pilate mixed with the sacrifices [Luke 13:2].

From this, then, we learn that the righteous often die a violent death according to God's hidden and unknown decisions, which are due to three reasons:

God often allows some righteous men to be killed by beasts or earthquakes or drowning or falling off cliffs to frighten others and say, "If he who was a man of God suffered such a thing, what is going to happen to us sinners? And if the righteous are barely saved, where will the ungodly and sinful be found? [1 Pet. 4:18]"

Still others, who perhaps had some minor defects and were allowed to suffer this violent death, will now find themselves perfect before God.

And some others, who often took upon themselves the sins of the people as though they were strong, are therefore surrendered to temptations and painful death, thus causing greater salvation both to themselves and to the people.

Christ was also wounded for our sins [Isaiah 5] and received death for our sake. With this in mind, let us not be surprised when we see that Isaiah was sawn [according to tradition], John was beheaded [Matthew 15:10], Stephen was stoned [Acts 7:58-60], Peter was crucified, and many other saints fell into terrible dangers and deaths.

In the same way, the violent death of evil people can be attributed to three reasons:

Either to chasten the rest of us by the terrible incident that happened to them.

Or that they themselves may find some relief in the afterlife (because those who are separated from the body by a bitter death find many benefits there. And this is what the Lord meant when he referred to some cities that did not accept his preaching: Sodom and Gomorrah will have a more tolerable punishment on the day of judgment than that city) [Matthew 15].

Or again out of divine wrath and threat, as happened in the case of Pharaoh [Ex. 14:27-28] and the flood [Gen. 7:4-6].

That is, some suffer only here, like Lazarus, others partly here and partly after death, just like those who were burned in Sodom [Gen. 14:24-25], and others only after death, like the rich man in the parable of Lazarus [Luke 14:19-31].

So when you see that someone fell off a cliff or drowned, don't say or examine, "Why did he die in this way? Had his time come, or did he die prematurely? Or was it with the devil's complicity?"

You should know that many times, we fall into temptations and calamities and deaths through our own indiscretion and insolence. For example, it happens to sailors who, seeing lousy weather looming, take the ship out of port and expose themselves to other dangers with neither God nor the devil willing this. But they do these and the like on their own initiative and authority.

For from the words of Christ: to you even the hairs of your head are all numbered [Luke 7:7] it is evident that Satan has no authority not only over men but also over horses, animals and pigs, as the Gospel testifies [Matthew 8:30-32].

Therefore, others of these violent deaths occur, as has been said, many times as God's threat to those who sin unrepentantly, as happened in the cases of the flood and Sodom. For the Bible says that the wicked have a terrible death [Job 9:23] and the death of sinners is evil [Psalm 22], and when a storm breaks out, the wicked perish [Proverbs 11:25], and the righteous escape the snare, and instead the wicked surrender to it [Proverbs 11].

Others again die violently by divine concession, as in the case of the children of Job [Job 19].

Others finally die violently with the simple knowledge of God without him being pleased or hindering. It says: Are not two sparrows for sale for a single copper coin? And yet none of them falls to the ground without my heavenly Father [Matthew 10:29]. He did not say these things to show that nothing is done without God's knowledge, but not that he is the one who acts in everything [cf. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, 34: “For what is viler than they?” says He; ‘nevertheless, not even these shall be taken without God's knowledge.’ For He means not this, ‘by His operation they fall,’ for this were unworthy of God; but, ‘nothing that is done is hid from Him.’”]

And perhaps by God's will, some die many times a bitter death for their salvation, as I mentioned above.

For example, when King Maurice [Flavius Maurice Tiberius, 582-602] begged God to pay in this world for his sins, he saw in his dream a super-bright king who gave the order to surrender himself to death to the soldier Phocas, which he did.

There was also an anchorite famous for his signs and wonders, who had a disciple in the desert. So it happened one day that this disciple visited a town that had an evil and godless ruler. He had died and was buried accompanied by crowds of people, with many honours, candles and incense. When the disciple returned to the desert, he found his God-bearing elder devoured by a hyena.

So he began to be anxious and almost to argue with God, saying: "Where is your righteous judgment, Lord? How is it that that wicked ruler, who provoked thee greatly, died so gloriously, while this holy man, who served thee faithfully, became the food of a beast?"

And while he was saying these and other similar things, complaining, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: "That ruler, who was utterly wicked, did a good deed. By the honour done him at the funeral, he received the reward for that good work, so he went away to the next life utterly condemned. Your old man again, who did all the godly deeds, had as a man some little defect, and by this bitter death, he made up for it and went away there completely clean."

So, we should not condemn those who die violently and say it is because of their sins. For no man can clearly know by what criteria God arranges these things. Many times, such deaths have also happened to righteous people from some unknown causes.

Ecclesiastes says: It is possible for the righteous to be lost while on the road of God and for the wicked to remain in his wickedness. But it is also possible for the righteous to be rewarded in this life by God according to his deeds [Eccl. 7:15].

And David says: O my God, idolaters have come into the land of thy inheritance, they have defiled thy holy temple, they have made Jerusalem like a storehouse of fruit, they have left the carcasses of thy servants for food to the vultures of heaven, and the flesh of thy saints for the beasts of the earth. They poured out their blood like water around Jerusalem, and there was no man to bury them [Ps. 61:1-3].

Still, many righteous live a short time in the interest of their souls, as Solomon says: Because he pleased the Lord, he was loved by Him, and while he lived among sinners, he was transferred to eternity. He was taken suddenly, lest wickedness should alter his prudence and deceitfulness should deceive his soul. For the envy of immorality defiles the good, and the reproach of worldly desires perverts the harmless mind. Though he lived a little, yet he became old according to virtue. His soul was pleasing to the Lord, and therefore, he was snatched from the surroundings of sinners [Wis. Sol. 4:10-14].

Also, the righteous often fall into long physical illnesses, which sinners usually suffer because God allows it; he wants to show us all the value of the faith and patience of the righteous even during such calamities and evil deaths; that is, that they gladly accepted all painful and sorrowful things and endured bitter deaths, without being in any way corrupted in their love for God.

Like Isaac, who, when in his old age, was deprived of this temporary light [Gen. 27:1], was not shaken in his love for God.

Job also, though he yielded to great temptations, remained steadfast.

Even the Apostle had a lifelong disease in his body and did not cease to love God. To this disease, he refers when he says: And for the exceeding revelations, I was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan, to slap me, that I might not boast. Three times I besought the Lord to deliver me from this trial, and he answered me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for my own strength is made perfect by sickness' [2 Cor. 12:7-9].

Again, addressing the Galatians, he speaks of his sickness: 'And for my bodily affliction, you did not despise me nor were disgusted by me, but received me as an emissary of God, as Jesus Christ himself [Gal. 4:14].

Since, as it has been proved, some unpleasant things happen to holy men, even physical illnesses and painful deaths, we cannot rashly and absolutely condemn as sinners those who suffer such things, lest by making wrong judgments about these things, we should become like Job's friends, who, when they saw the awful plague and the heap of worms, condemned him as a sinner, because they ignored the divine economy, which enabled him to suffer such great temptations from the devil. And they were to inherit a terrible loss to their souls because they spoke contrary to the truth if Job's prayer did not have time to atone for them before God [Job 42:7-9].

The murderer, on the other hand, though he slays him who has fallen into his hands by divine concession, is slain afterwards by the princes according to the law of the Lord because he has desired and performed an evil deed.

From the Speech on Providence by the Bishop of Emesa, Nemesios:

How, then, he says, do holy men fall into bitter deaths and unjustified slaughter? And if unjustly, why does not Divine Providence prevent murder? And if justly, then they who kill are certainly not responsible.

To this, we have to say that the murderer kills unjustly, while the slain is killed either justly or in his own interest.

He is killed righteously for sinful deeds which are unknown to us. He is killed in his own interest when Divine Providence foresees the evil deeds he is about to do and judges that it is in his interest to end his life thus far.

But the murderer kills unjustly because he does so with his will for gain and robbery. The act depends on us, but we do not determine the suffering, that is, whether we shall suffer murder.

And no death is evil, except that which is due to sin, as is evident from the death of holy men. For, saith he, the death of his holy ones is honoured [Ps. 115:6].

But the sinner, whether he dies in bed or suddenly and without suffering, meets an evil death since he takes sin with him to the grave as an evil companion. For, saith he, the death of sinners is evil [Ps. 33:22].

So he who commits the murder does evil. For in the case of the justly murdered, he is placed in the category of public executions, and in the case of those who are murdered in the interest of their souls, he is placed in the category of unjust and foolish murderers.

From St. Basil's speech, *That God is not the cause of evil*:

The evil par excellence, which primarily deserves to be called evil, is sin and depends on our own will. It depends on us to abstain from wickedness or to be wicked.

Of the other evils, others are permitted as contests to show the prowess of the combatants, as in Job's case, the deprivation of children, the sudden disappearance of all property, and the plague of the ulcer [Job 1:14-19, 2:7].

Others as a remedy for sins, as in the case of David, the dishonouring of the royal house, to punish him for his unlawful lust [cf. 2 Kings 12:11-12].

We also perceive that some other kind of calamity comes from the righteous judgment of God to make more prudent those who easily flow into sin, as in the case of Dathan and Abiron, whom the earth opened under their feet like a pit and swallowed up [Num. 16:31-34]. Here, of course, they did not benefit from this mode of punishment since they went straight to hell, but by their suffering, they made the rest more prudent.

So Pharaoh was also oppressed with all his army [Ex. 14:27-28]. Thus were the former inhabitants of Palestine destroyed by the Israelites [cf. Acts 13:19].

From the speech of St. John Chrysostom *On the earthquake*:

There is no righteous man who has not committed some sin nor a sinner who has no good.

If, therefore, you see a righteous man sick or falling into some temptation, do not be alarmed, but think of him and say, "This righteous man must certainly have committed as a man some little evil and is being punished here, that he may not be punished in eternity."

Again, if you see a sinner, who grabs, covets, and does a myriad of evils, prospering, do not wonder but say, "He who commits so many evils and suffers no calamity has certainly done some good and is rewarded for it here, that he may then be damned in eternity."

Therefore, because Lazarus also had some sin and the rich man did some good deeds, Abraham said: Thou hast received the recompense of thy good deeds in thy earthly life, and Lazarus of evil [Luke 16:25].

From St. John Chrysostom's speech to Stagius:

And one asks: "Why have many from the beginning to the end of their lives fallen into many calamities?" Because in the first place, God punishes them for their wickedness, and in the second place, others may benefit from the evils that befall them. But if this does not apply to all, it is because the time of judgment has not yet come.

"Why then," he says, "are some punished as great sinners before they have yet acquired the knowledge of good and evil?" The cause of this is not one, but many and various, for it might be due to the indifference of the parents who brought them up, and to the evil environment in which they were brought up, and to many other causes. Moreover, God knows that many of them will become evil, so He restrains them with these punishments, as with some handcuffs.

From St. John Chrysostom's interpretation of the *Second Epistle to Timothy*:

If no sinners were punished, everyone would believe God does not care for human things.

And if all were punished here, no one would believe that there would be a resurrection, for all would enjoy their works' recompense here on earth.

That's why sometimes he punishes, and sometimes he doesn't. For this reason, the righteous are afflicted in this life because they are sojourners; they are strangers, live in exile, and endure these things to be tested, as Job did. But if sinners ever suffer the like, they are punished for their sins. For there are some good men who have some evil deeds and deposit them here, as well as some evil men who have some good deeds and are rewarded for them here, to be punished in the next life.

From St. John Chrysostom's interpretation of the *Gospel of John*:

And why, saith he, are not all punished according to the same measure? Indeed, we see many vicious men having robust and vigorous bodies and enjoying great prosperity. But the fact that they do not suffer at all here becomes the procurator of greater punishment there. And this is

what the Apostle meant when he said: Because the Lord judges us, we are chastened in this life, that we may not be condemned in the next with the world [1 Cor. 11:32].

From the discourse of St. Gregory the Theologian, *On the Love of Poverty*:

Whether calamities, i.e. sicknesses, come from God is not so apparent since even the material nature itself involves the abnormality, as is the case with rheumatism.

And who knows whether the one is punished for his wickedness and the other is exalted for his virtue, or whether it is quite the opposite: that is, the one is exalted because of his wickedness and the other suffers for the sake of his virtue? Thus, the one is exalted more, only to fall worse, having previously let all his wickedness explode like a disease so that he may be punished more justly. While the other is afflicted to the astonishment of others, that he may be completely purified, like gold in the crucible, casting off every trace of evil that he had. For no man is clean from moral impurities [cf. Job 14:4].

From the *Ascetical Works* of St Basil:

Not all the diseases we sometimes see medicine being useful are due to human nature. For many times, illnesses are punishments for our sins and lead us to repentance. For the Bible says: Whom the Lord loveth the Lord chasteneth [Prov. 3:12 & Heb. 12:6] and: Therefore many are indisposed and sick among you, and many have died. For if we judged ourselves, we should not be judged: but being judged of the Lord, we are chastened, lest we be condemned with the world [1 Cor. 11:30-32].

In such cases, people should be quiet, set aside medical help, and endure what God allows, according to what He says: I will endure the wrath of the Lord because I have sinned before him [Mic. 7:9]. Also, to show their correction by doing works worthy of repentance [cf. Luke 3:8] and to remember the Lord who says: Behold, thou art made whole; sin no more, lest thou suffer any worse [Jn. 5:14].

And it happens sometimes at the request of the evil one. Then the benevolent Lord accepts and sends a strong adversary of the devil into the fight and thus crushes his boastfulness with the patient endurance of his servant, just as we know it happened in the case of Job [Job 1:12, 2:6].

Or to be held up by God as an example to the fugitives of those who can endure suffering unto death. Like Lazarus, who, though he was full of so many plagues, nowhere is it written that he asked anything of the rich man nor that he resented his condition. Hence, he found rest in the bosom of Abraham, for it was precisely because he had received evils in his lifetime [Luke 16:25].

But we have found another reason for the illnesses of the saints, as in the case of the Apostle Paul. That is, lest it should appear that he exceeded the limits of human nature, and lest anyone think that he was superior to others in the natural constitution - as was the case with the inhabitants of Lycaonia, who offered him crowns and bulls [Acts n. 13] - he was continually sick to prove that his nature was really human.

What profit, then, could come to them all from medicine? Are they not in greater danger by being distracted from spiritual work and occupied with the care of the body?

But those who have brought disease upon themselves by their own harmful diet must use the treatment of the body as a type and example for the care of the soul, as was said before.

For to shun the sound effects of medicine altogether shows a friendly disposition, while again, to entrust the hope of our health exclusively to physicians is foolish. Just as therefore, while we cultivate the land, we ask God for the fruits, and while we trust the captain with the helm of the ship, we pray to God to save us from the storm, so also when we call the doctor, if there is need, we do not cease to hope in God.

From the *Chapters* by Saint Maximus:

The prudent man, considering the remedy which the judgments of God bring about, gladly endures the calamities which befall him because of them and considers nothing else the cause but his sins.

But the fool, being unable to understand the wisest providence of God when he sins and is punished, holds either God or men responsible for his calamities.

It is not possible, therefore, that he who has sinned can escape the future judgment without undergoing either voluntary labours or involuntary calamities here on earth.



